

‘Propagating what the Ancients taught and the moderns improved’:¹ The Sources of George Motherby’s *A New Medical Dictionary; or, a General Repository of Physic, 1775*

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1. George Motherby’s life²

George Motherby, author of *A New Medical Dictionary; or, General repository of physic* (hereafter *General Repository*), 1775, was born in Bridlington, Yorkshire, in 1731. Even the sketchy details of his life which are available are subject to some doubt.³ According to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter ODNB) notice, he was trained as a physician, receiving a medical degree from the University of Aberdeen in 1767. He appears as a surgeon in Liverpool in 1766 (Liverpool Directory: 22) and later as a physician in Highgate (Middlesex) (Medical Register 1780: 121). Motherby died in 1793. ODNB also reports that he was conspicuous for his work in Königsberg, where he introduced the technique of vaccination for smallpox about 1770.⁴ Gause, the Königsberg historian, mentions his having been in Königsberg, and the Königsberg *Konsistorialrath* and colleague of Kant, Friedrich Samuel Bock, notes Motherby’s skill in variolation in a pamphlet published in 1770, as well as noting that he is leaving the city and expressing the hope that he will return (Sembrzycki 238). It is not known that he ever did.

Gause also points out that the first variolation in Königsberg was actually performed by Johann Wilhelm Werner in 1757 (Gause 232). Robert Motherby (1736-1801), George’s brother, migrated from Scotland and founded a trading company, Green, Motherby & Co., and is reported to have been ‘a close friend of Immanuel Kant’.⁵ Gause claims that Green brought Robert to Königsberg as an eighteen-year-old (193), hence about 1754. Robert married Charlotte Toussaint, daughter of a Huguenot family living in Königsberg, with whom he had eleven children (Sembrzycki 239) including at least three sons,

¹ *A New Medical Dictionary, 1775*, iii.

² My thanks to the Centre of Excellence for Variation, Contacts and Change in English (Varieng), funded by the Finnish Academy, and to Prof. John Considine for his helpful comments and suggestions.

³ For further details, see the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry.

⁴ Although even the DNB uses the term ‘vaccination’, this is not strictly correct. Motherby’s technique, known as ‘variolation’, was to introduce live smallpox into the subject through a scratch or incision in the hope that a mild form of the disease would ensue. The technique, often successful, seems to have been first recorded in England as being employed by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in 1721 to inoculate her daughter. Jenner used cowpox serum at the end of the eighteenth century, hence ‘vaccination’. William Motherby (1776-1847), George’s nephew, also became well-known for this work on smallpox in Königsberg in the early nineteenth century (see ODNB under George Motherby).

⁵ Robert is usually described as a Scot, but there is no reason to make this connexion, given that his father was George Motherby of Hull. The connexion with Scotland may have arisen from the younger George’s having taken a degree at Aberdeen. Fischer’s mention of the Motherbys (1902: 225) is therefore somewhat tenuous. The note by William Bell (1862) states that John Motherby, whom the author knew personally, was ‘the youngest son of a Scotch merchant at Königsberg’, but this seems not to be reliable. The Scottish connexion, however, whatever its source and nature, seems clear enough, at least by John’s generation. Some corrections to Bell’s account were made by S. H. R. (1872).

George, born in 1770,⁶ William, born in Königsberg in September 1776, and John (1784-1813) (see Tipton 1995).⁷ The businessman Robert, who was a close friend of Immanuel Kant and appears in a picture by Emil Doerstling (1792/3) (Kant-Forschungsstelle – Kantiana-Sammlung ‘Kant-ikonographie’ <http://www.kant.uni-mainz.de/ikono.htm>; accessed 12.4.07), may have introduced George to the lively circle of friends who gathered around Kant at Vorderrossgarten 96 in Königsberg (Grimoni and Will 1997).

George died in 1793 in Beverley, Yorkshire. DNB reports that he was described as ‘late of Highgate, Middlesex’ (Baigent 2004). George’s dictionary is apparently best remembered for quite incidental matters such as being the first to list the word *placebo*, and for being an illustrated dictionary,⁸ but its place in the English lexicographical tradition, especially in the generation following Benjamin Martin and Samuel Johnson, remains to be assessed. The present paper outlines both its place in the chronological tradition of English dictionaries, especially the tradition of medical dictionaries stemming from *The Physical Dictionary* and Blancard, assessing its contribution in lexicographical rather than medical terms.

2. The *General Repository* and the tradition of medical dictionaries in English

Table 1 below shows the sequence of stand-alone medical dictionaries in English down to Motherby.

Table 1 The sequence of medical dictionaries in English to 1775

Anon. ⁹	<i>A physical dictionary</i>	1657
Blankaart (Blankaert/Blancard), Steven	<i>A physical dictionary</i>	1684
Quincy, John	<i>Lexicon physico-medicum or, A new physical dictionary</i>	1719
James, Robert	<i>A medicinal dictionary</i>	1743
Barrow, John	<i>Dictionarium medicum universale: or, a new medicinal dictionary</i>	1749
Motherby, George	<i>A new medical dictionary; or, general repository of physic</i>	1775

The English medical dictionary’s longer history stretches from the *Physical Dictionary* through the dictionaries mentioned in Table 1 to those by Robley Dunglison, published in America; Robert Mayne, whose lexicon formed the basis of the medical dictionary nearest in scope and ambition, if not in method, to the OED, the *New Sydenham Society Lexicon* edited by Leonard Sedgwick and Henry Power toward the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

⁶ Herr Robert Motherby, ein hier etablierter englischer Kaufmann, mein sehr werther Freund, wünscht nemlich seinen einzigen Sohn George Motherby im Philanthropin Dero gütigen Vorsorge anvertrauet zu sehen. Seine Grundsätze stimmen mit denen, auf welchen Ihre Anstalt errichtet ist, selbst in dem, worin sich diese am weitesten vom gemeinen Vorurtheile entfernet, auf das vollkommenste überein und das Ungebräuchliche wird ihn niemals abhalten, in allem, was edel und gut ist, Ihren ferneren Vorschlägen und Anordnungen willigst beizutreten. Sein Sohn ist allererst d. 7ten Aug dieses Jahrs 6 Jahre alt. Kant: Briefwechsel, Brief 109, An Christian Heinrich Wolke. 28. März 1776 <http://www.ikp.uni-bonn.de/kant/briefe/109.html>. Kant seems to have been in no doubt about the Englishness of his friend.

⁷ Robert Motherby (d.1832), continued the Scottish connexion, publishing his *Pocket Dictionary of the Scottish Idiom* in Königsberg in 1826.

⁸ There are in fact illustrations in Quincy’s 1719 medical dictionary, albeit very modest woodcuts, as on B7^f.

⁹ Sometimes ascribed to John Garfield; for a discussion of the authorship of this work, see Tyrkkö, this volume.

¹⁰ This is a massive work, which like the OED itself, caused problems of size to the society which undertook it, took many more years than was estimated to complete, and was despaired of at various times during its preparation. Unlike the OED, however, it was eventually hustled to completion, the last volumes being left in an unfinished and unsatisfactory state.

3. Ancients and moderns

Motherby published with the avowed sense that ‘Propagating what the Ancients taught and the moderns improved’ (Pref. iii) was self-evidently laudable and desirable. This however apparently assumes that what the ancients knew was right and that they may still teach the practitioners of the late eighteenth century, and that the moderns may improve what they teach, but not fundamentally change it. Whether Motherby’s own claim and assumptions are justified is a question underlying the present article.

Motherby also mentions in the preface that ‘each respective article will terminate with a reference to some of the most eminent writers on the subject’ (Pref. iii), which suggests that tracing his sources will not be straightforward, and that one must not expect to find direct citations or paraphrase in all cases. How dependent he is on his sources is however a question which this research is ultimately intended to answer, although it lies beyond the scope of this article. The declared purpose of his dictionary is ‘speedily to assist the memory in practical researches’ (Pref. iii). His references must thus be taken as indications of what he believes to be the most useful literature on the subject covered by the lemma in question, rather than invariably the source of particular quotations. He also addresses his work to non-professionals: ‘It is to be hoped that this Work will be found of general benefit to those whose circumstances will not permit of an academic education, and who are nevertheless desirous of obtaining a competent share of medical knowledge’ (Pref. v–vi). Presumably in deference to such readers, he appends an English-Latin index to the work, an innovation in such dictionaries. In line with his stated objective, a cursory glance at the references in almost any entry will show that he normally employs the familiar ‘the reader already knows’ principle, which assumes that a hint will suffice to direct the reader to an already familiar work.

As to the ancients, Hippocrates, he claims, ‘hath described, with elegance and accuracy, most of the diseases that are now known; the names by which he called them were the same as those now in use’ (Pref. iii). Among the few diseases not known to Hippocrates, Motherby lists small-pox, measles, and lues venerea. Motherby then points out that Galen, Celsus, Paulus Ægineta and others such as Alexander Trallian (Alexander of Tralles) and Rhazes (al-Rāzī) have retained their reputation despite more recent advances in physiology and anatomy (Pref. iv–v). This seems remarkably deferential in the light of the welter of scientific and medical literature which had been published across Europe in the eighteenth century, represented in England primarily by publications such as the *Philosophical Transactions* from the mid-seventeenth century.

4. Further background considerations

The first and most obvious questions concern the place of Motherby’s dictionary in the succession of medical dictionaries, but this question has been largely set aside for the purposes of this paper. Suffice it to say that my previous research has shown little dependence between Motherby’s text and that of the preceding medical dictionaries, although much more remains to be done, and he does show at least some dependence on James. On the dictionaries themselves, English medical dictionaries are characterised by

1. being essentially Latin/Greek-English both in terms of word-list and use of English forms of Latin head-words in the definitions
2. Not showing clear dependency relations from one to the next
3. Showing a disjunction between the word-list and the definitions from one to the next, unlike conventional dictionaries
4. being relatively encyclopaedic.

The more immediate questions concern the extent to which they preserve old knowledge and introduce new.

In general, one must also consider the perceived function of works used as dictionary sources as well. Since these sources by and large were not themselves conceived as dictionaries, lexicographers were obliged to make strategic decisions about what information to transfer and how to do so. Scholars like John Ray tried to interpret the world as they observed it as exemplifying the divine order, even in their reference works, and those publishing in the pages of such publications as the *Philosophical Transactions* were increasingly concerned to push back the boundaries of knowledge in the modern sense, while medical practitioners and the users of medical dictionaries were trying to cure and help patients. How these intentions intersect and the role that medical dictionaries play in this are questions to be asked.

5. Data

The data examined in this paper is derived from every tenth page of the *General Repository*. Entries continuing from a previous page and those continuing on to the next have only been read on the relevant page. If an author is mentioned more than once under a head-word, all instances have been noted, except for obvious repetitions of the same reference.

The raw list, shown in Table 1, and totalling 266 sources in all, is clearly headed by the seventeenth-century naturalist John Ray with 54, including the five not attributed to the *Historia Plantarum*,¹¹ but he yields first place to Lewis (32) if Neumann (28) is counted as Lewis's work, Lewis/Neumann totalling 60. Another seventeenth-century scientist, the Dutchman Herman Boerhaave, has 19, followed by the first classical writers, Hippocrates (16) and Galen (14), Celsus (11). Paulus Aegineta has 10, as does the keeper of the Chelsea physic garden, Philip Miller, and the *Surgery* of Lorenz Heister. John Hunter has nine, and the first three volumes of *Medical observations and inquiries ... By a Society of physicians in London* and Thomas Sydenham, a leading figure of the late seventeenth century, both have eight.

Table 1 below shows the major sources identified, the number of references to each and the dates of birth and death of the authors. This table also requires some further explanation. First, dates of birth and death are only listed where they are known, no guesses or estimates having been made for this paper. Likewise, the work cited and its date of publication may not be known, or be difficult to establish, especially where Motherby may have used either a translation or the original, and it cannot be established which. The precise source is often impossible to trace. No differentiation has been made where multiple works by the same author (or institution, as in the case of the 'London College'), have been cited. Further research will no doubt clear up some of these problems, but this report must remain somewhat sketchy for now. Finally, the list in Table 2 only goes down as far as three references per source, but further comment on his sources obviously applies to the full list, not shown here, which goes down to singleton references.

Table 2

Author/work if cited by Motherby)	No. of refs.	Date of birth and death (if known)	Date of main work cited (if established)
Ray, John (<i>Raii Hist.</i>)	54	1627-1705	1686-1704
Lewis, William (<i>Lewis's Mat. Med.</i>)	32	1708-1781	1753
Neumann, Caspar (<i>Neumann's Chemical Works</i> var. <i>Newmann's Chem. Works</i>)	28	1683-1737	1759

¹¹ Note that so far no references have been found to John Berkenhout's *Clavis anglica linguae botanica; or, a botanical lexicon* London, 1764.

Boerhaave, Herman	19	1688–1738	
Hippocrates	16	c. 460– c. 370 BC	
Galen	14	AD 129–200	
Celsus	11	c. 25 BC- c. AD 50	
Paulus Ægineta	10	7 th cent?	
Heister, Lorenz (<i>Heister's Surgery</i>)	10	1683–1758	1743
Miller, Philip	10	1691–1771	
John Hunter	9	1728–1793	
<i>Lon. Med. Obs. & Inq.</i> vol. i, ii & iii	8		1758–9
Sydenham, Thomas	8	1624–1689	
Ætius (Amidenus) (<i>Tetrab. iv. Serm. iii. cap. xxi</i>)	7	AD C4–C6 ?	
Hoffmann, Friedrich (<i>Hoffman's Med. Rat. Syst.</i> and <i>Obs. Physico-Chym.</i>)	7	1660–1742	1750–60?
Macquer, Pierre Joseph (<i>Dictionary of Chemistry</i>)	6	1718–1784	1771
Percival, Thomas (<i>Percivals Essays Medical and Exper.</i>)	6	1740–1804	1773
Dioscorides	5	c. 40– c. 90 AD	
London College	5		
Paracelsus	5	1493–1541	
Sharp, Samuel	5	1709–1778	
Avicenna	4	c. 980–1037	
Gooch, Benjamin (<i>Med. Obs.</i>)	4	1707/8–1776	1758(?)
Le Dran, Henri François (<i>Le Dran's Operations</i>)	4	1685–1770	1749(?)
Oribasius	4	320–400	
Pott, Percival	4	1714–1788	
Rulandus, Martinus (Rulandt; either the Elder 1532-1602 or the Younger 1569-1611)	4	15–16(?)	
M. A. Severinus (Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius)	4	c. AD 480–524/6	
Tournefort, Joseph Pitton de (<i>Tournefort's Mat. Med.</i>)	4	1656–1708	
Alexander Trallian (Alexander of Tralles)	4	AD C5	
Albinus, Bernhard Seigfried	3	1697–1770	
Aretæus of Cappadocia	3	AD C1?	
Coelius Aurelianus	3	AD C2?	
Dale, Samuel	3	1659–1739	
Haller, Albrecht von (<i>Haller's Physiology of the Veins</i>) ¹²	3	1708–1777	
Linnæus (Linné, Carl von)	3	1707–78	
Pliny (the elder)	3	AD 23 – AD 79	

¹² Possibly his dissertation on the motion of the blood, published in English in 1757.

Pringle, Sir John (<i>Observations on the Diseases of the Army</i>)	3	1707–1782	1752
Dr. Shebbeare	3	1709–1788	
Winslow, Jacques-Bénigne (<i>Winslow's Anatomy</i>)	3	1669–1760	1733

Motherby's references come into various categories. Some are to authors, works and page numbers, an example being 'Lewis's Mat. Med.', but even here the reference is somewhat indirect, being either to the materia medica section of Lewis's *New Dispensatory* of 1753 or *An Experimental History of the Materia Medica* in 1761. Others are merely to authors with no further specification in the text, such as 'Dr. Nisbet says that in the blood ... there is an ossifying juice', or 'See Kerckringius, Coiterus, Eyssonius, Ruysch, Nesbit, Albinus, and Monro' (s.v. OSSIFICATIO). Still others are quite indirect, such as 'The London college directs a mel helleboratum' s.v. HELLEBORUS ALBUS, presumably a reference to one of the publications of the Royal College of Physicians. In many cases, it will be impossible to determine whether a reference is to a Latin or English version of the work in question where there is a translation. What status to ascribe to mentions like 'The famous Coventry cure is cork, pumice stone, in equal parts, calcined ...' is unclear (s.v. BRONCHOCELE).

The most difficult author references to sort out among this list are those to William Lewis, who was responsible for *A Course of Practical Chemistry* in 1746, and then an abridged version of the *Edinburgh Medical Essays*. He next translated the *Edinburgh Pharmacopoeia*, publishing it in 1748, and rewrote Quincy's *Compleat English Dispensatory*, which appeared as *The New Dispensatory* in 1753.¹³ His translation and adaption of Neumann's Chemistry appeared in 1759, and *An Experimental History of the Materia Medica* in 1761. Other references are well nigh impossible to identify, such as 'Dr. Grew was used to to mix essential oil with with water by means of gum arabic' (s.v. GUMMI ARABICUM) since, while this may be an allusion to an actual passage in one of Grew's works, it may also be anecdotal. Allusions such as 'On the culture, nutrition, &c. &c. &c. of vegetables, see Linnaeus, Malpighi, Grew, Hill, &c.' (s.v. VEGETABILIS) present similar problems.

Caspar Neumann published in both Latin and German, including articles in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions*. Some of his writings actually represent notes of his lectures, which were apparently rather digressive, and Lewis has edited a good deal of this material as well as translating it. Some of the abridged lectures consisted of 'narratives and discussion often foreign to the subject and frequently frivolous in themselves' (1759 Preface). One sometimes senses Lewis's exasperation: 'An account of the apparatus of the tea-table, and the manner of making tea, fills a quarto page and a half of this abridgement' (1759 Preface). From our point of view, it seems better to regard this work as Lewis's, given his remarks about the task he was confronted with: 'The merit of this work ... engaged me to revise and abridge an *English* translation, and to make such additions as appeared necessary for supplying the deficiencies of the Author ... Accordingly I have ventured to new mould the whole fabrick' (Lewis/Neumann 1759: Preface).

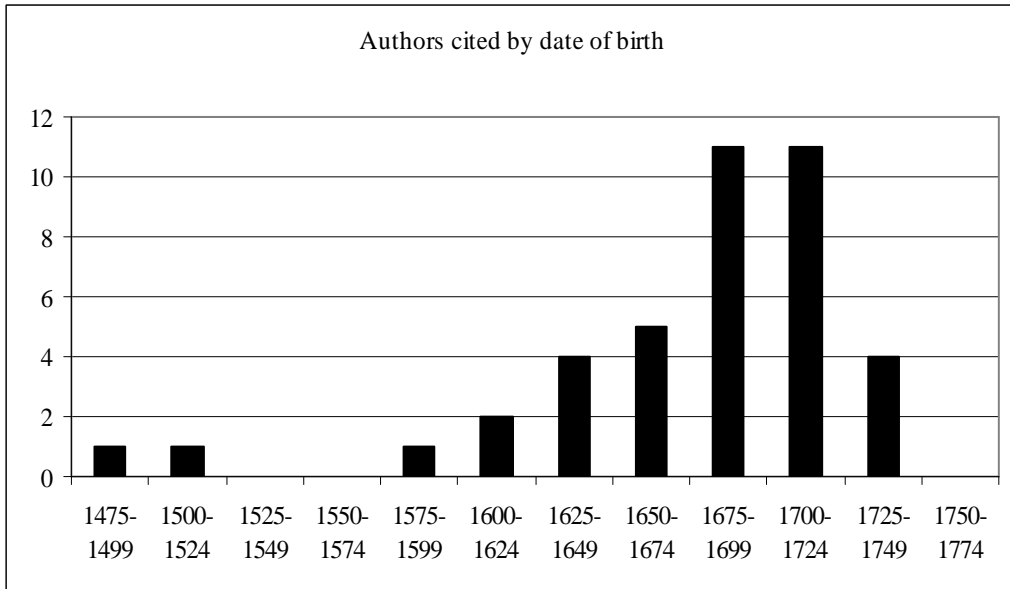
6. Discussion

How up-to-date was Motherby? So far, the most recent reference found is to Benjamin Gooch's *Medical and chirurgical observations, as an appendix to a former publication. By Benjamin Gooch surgeon*. London, 1773. The next most recent is to Alexander Hunter's *Georgical Essays* of 1769, followed by Blackrie's 1766 work on the treatment of the stone and Fordyce's *Elements of Agriculture and Vegetation* 1765. Others are doubtless mentioned on the pages unexamined here, but it is hoped that the present findings are at least diagnostic.

¹³ The publishing history of the various dispensatories is complex. One series was based on Culpeper, another was issued by the RCP, another was based on Quincy's work, and so on. Titles varied considerably. Other dispensatories were issued in Edinburgh and Dublin.

Some further analysis of his references was made in an attempt to answer this question. First, the early modern and modern authors he refers to were listed by date of birth, since the complications of identification of particular works are great and will need much more research. Thus far, 54 dates of birth and death have been identified, the earliest inclusion being Paracelsus (born 1493). All earlier authors have been excluded. All NS/OS dates have been listed under the earlier date, and doubtful dates have been treated as firm. The only date of birth entirely missing is unfortunately for John Quincy (see Moore 2004), and it has not so far been possible to determine whether the elder and younger Rulandt (sixteenth century) is being cited.

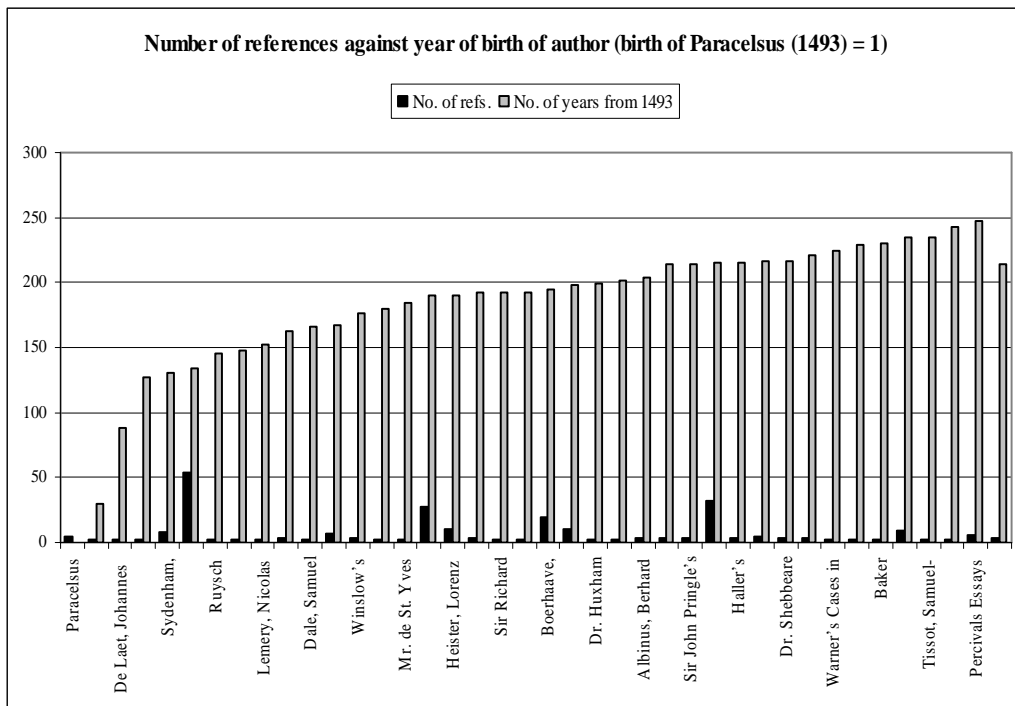
Chart 1. Numbers of authors cited by date of birth, in ‘generations’ of 25 years 1475–1775



It might make sense to read the graph from right to left as a cline from ‘completely up-to-date’ to ‘becoming a classic’. The graph suggests that the dates of actual works cited will show them grouping predominantly in the early to mid-eighteenth century, so that Motherby, despite his many references to the ancients, is in fact reasonably up-to-date.

Next, the number of actual references per author was analysed in a similar way, and graphed against time, expressed as years elapsed from the date of birth of Paracelsus (1493). The numbers along the x-axis thus represent authors in chronological order of date of birth from Paracelsus (1) to Percival (42). Quincy was omitted because of the lack of a date of birth.

Chart 2. Number of references (series 1; no. 5=Ray; 18=Miller; 29=Lewis (without Neumann); 39=Hunter) against time in years from birth of Paracelsus (0-247; series 2)



The four largest sources are, reading from the left, Ray, Neumann, Boerhaave, and Lewis. This chart shows that while the number of authors referred to steadily increases, the number of references to each, if anything, declines slightly. This may reflect the rising reputation of older authorities and a tendency to cite recent authors for a paper or treatise on a particular subject, but not for more general works (which Motherby does tend to eschew; see below). This certainly seems to be the implication of charts 1 and 2 taken together. However, the number of older authorities is sufficiently small at this stage for an argument to be made for special factors applying. In Ray's case, this would probably be the relatively tardy acceptance of Linnaean botanical classification in England compared with elsewhere.

Finally, works which can be identified were listed over a somewhat shorter period by date of publication. Insufficient work has been done on this yet, and it is problematical because of the difficulty of identifying many of the actual works mentioned, but it may at least be indicative of a trend.

Chart 3. Number of references (black) plotted against years from John Ray's *Historia Plantarum* vol. 1 (1686) (grey)

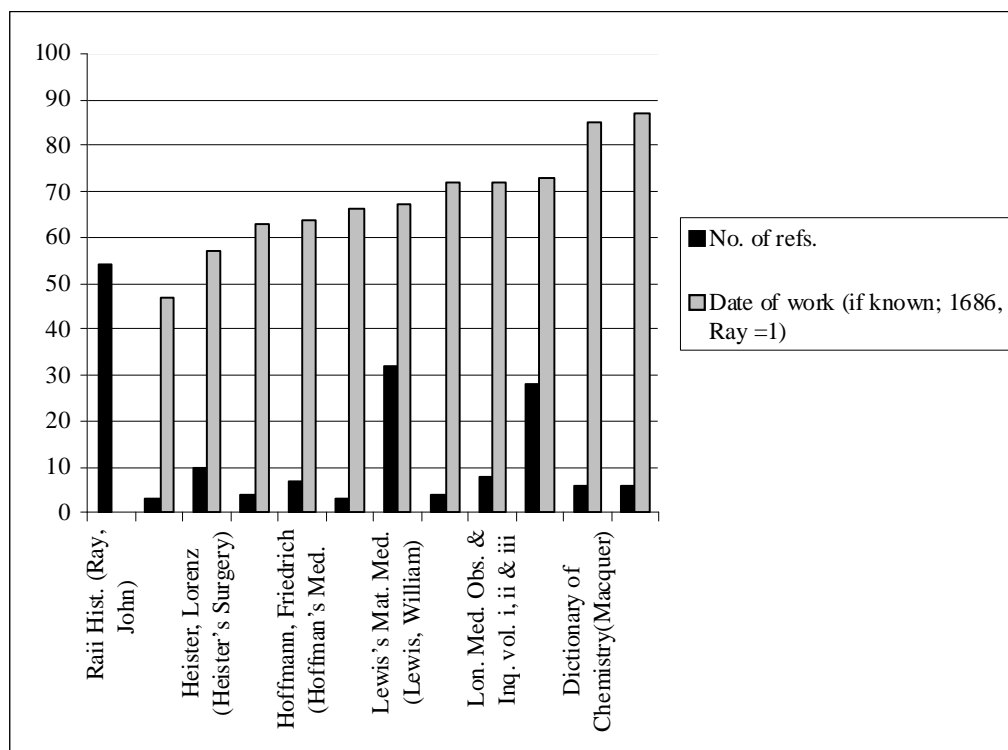


Chart three is full of interest, but may be misleading, since some major authors could not be included for lack of knowledge of the actual source publications and dates, including Boerhaave (19), Miller (11) and Hunter (9). Miller, to take an example, might have been cited from any of the eight editions which appeared between 1732 and 1768, the last perhaps being the most significant, as it is the first to include wide-ranging acceptance of the Linnaean system of classification. It has been assumed that Motherby used the most recent editions where more than one was available, again, not a very safe assumption.¹⁴ Dates were also regularised to a single figure once again. Nevertheless, my feeling is that the basic pattern which shows here would not be greatly altered by the inclusion of this data.

7. Conclusions

These findings seem to demonstrate several things. Firstly, Motherby tends to cite the classics, both recent and ancient, with great regularity. More recent classics like Ray predominate, but his use of Ray also demonstrates a failure, relatively speaking, to come to terms with Linnaeus, recognised in England by the work of Colin Milne, to which no reference has been found so far in Motherby. Motherby certainly does use recent scholarly papers on individual topics, however. He tends not to cite collections and digests of the works of others, such as William Salmon's *Medicina Practica* of 1707, or Nicholas Jenty's *A course of anatomico-physiological lectures*, 1765, neither of which appear in the present data. Neither is there any reference in the present material to Elizabeth Blackwell's *A curious herbal*, first published in 1737. His approach seems sensible and commendable, except for his deference towards the

¹⁴ This assumption raises interesting questions. Was Motherby more likely to have access to the recent editions than to the older ones? Is it possible to tell which edition is being used where many entries remain the same between editions? If not, how should dates be approximated to reflect Motherby's activity with acceptable accuracy?

ancients. With hindsight, it seems perverse to say that Hippocrates had described most diseases when Friedrich Hoffmann, for instance, one of Motherby's sources, had described both appendicitis and German measles for the first time in the previous generation. As we have seen, however, his interest in more recent findings and new knowledge, however, extended well beyond his obvious concern with the treatment and cure of smallpox.

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